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AUTHOR Pecor, Charles J.
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ABSTRACT

Many students come to college with little knowledge of or interest in traditional humanities topics; however, a college teacher of humanities can use science fiction as a "door in," a tool to take students from the known to the unknown. Literary elements such as characterization, plot, setting, theme, and point of view are present in science fiction works. Comparison and contrast of the ways in which different media treat the same stories and/or ideas can be accomplished, for example with H. G. Wells's "The War of the Worlds," Orson Welles's 1938 radio broadcast of the story, and the 1953 George Pal film version, as well as media treatments of other stories. The techniques and aesthetics of filmmaking can also be taught using inexpensive videocassettes of science fiction films. Study of science fiction can lead naturally to discussion of ideas, attitudes, ethics and morality or ecology and the environment--all traditional topics in humanities study. Science fiction can also enable students to gain new ways of viewing the world and its possible futures, much as mythologies explained the world to ancient civilizations. Finally, science fiction offers a way to bridge the gap between the humanities and the sciences. A short selected bibliography is appended. (HTH)

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SCIENCE FICTION AND THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT: A DOOR IN

Charles J. Pecor
Humanities Division
Macon Junior College

On Saturday, October 14, 1066 AD, the cavalry of Duke William of Normandy (later known as the Conqueror) threw itself twice against the shield wall of Harold, Saxon King of England. The shield wall, a standard defensive tactic of foot soldiers against mounted men, held in both attacks and the Normans fell back from Senlac ridge.

At this point the Saxon's made a critical mistake; they followed the retreating Normans into the valley. The Norman horsemen turned and charged the hapless Saxon foot, cutting them down and then charging the hill and hacking King Harold to death. England became Norman.

The Norman riders were successful because they could protect their left sides by the use of the kite shield and could hold their lances in their right hands. The reason that their hands were free was an innovation in technology--the stirrup. This device, introduced from northern India, perhaps by way of the Arabs in Persia, allowed the Normans to use their feet and legs to control their mounts.

On August 6, 1945, the Enola Gay, a high-flying B-29 bomber, applied an innovation in technology to hasten the end of World War II by dropping an atomic device on Hiroshima, Japan. Three days later another atomic weapon was dropped on the city of Nagasaki. Japan surrendered shortly thereafter,

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thus bringing the war to an end.

In the above examples the parallels are fairly easy to draw. In each case an application of technology changed the direction of history.

The difference between the two events is somewhat more subtle. A Saxon bard, even if he could have conceived of a defeat at the hands of the Normans, would not have likely attributed such a loss to an innovation in technology. The same was not true regarding atomic weapons to science fiction writers in twentieth century America. They projected the use of atomic power, both for good and ill, well before scientists had the technology to create and use it. For example, in "Solution Unsatisfactory," a short story published several years before 1945, Robert Heinlein projects ending a war in Europe by scattering radio-active dust on selected parts of Germany. The story goes on beyond this point to foreshadow in a chilling fashion the conflict between America and the USSR, ending with an uneasy pax Americana with some aircraft loaded with the dust always in the air.

For the college teacher of courses in the humanities there is another significant difference between the Battle of Hastings and the end of World War II. Many students come to college with little knowledge of or interest in the history of western civilization and/or traditional literary values or works; however, they probably have some familiarity with and interest in science fiction. In the second half of this century there has been an increase in the availability of science fiction in books, in films, and on television; in the last ten years this increase has almost amounted to an explosion. The students may not know what a ballistae was but they know what the atomic bomb is. They may not be able to identify Polyphemos but they can identify Mr. Spock. They may not be familiar with Dr. Faustus but they are familiar with Dr. Who. They may not be aware of the voyage of the Argo but they are likely to be aware of the voyages of the Enterprise. They may not

know traditional Biblical stories but they know Ben Kenobi, Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, and the "Force." They may not have read The Adventures of Tom Sawyer but they might well have read Frank Herbert's Dune.

Moving from the known to the unknown is an ancient, honorable, and valid teaching technique and in an age in which there is such competition for the interest, and even the attention, of students, it seems reasonable and practical to utilize their existing knowledge of and interest in science fiction as "a door in." As a teaching tool science fiction has remarkable versatility since it can be used to teach the effectiveness of the written word, the spoken word, and visual images. It can be used to teach the traditional elements of literature, it allows for the comparison of media, and, perhaps most importantly of all, it can stimulate the discussion of ideas.

If one accepts character, plot, setting, theme, and point of view as the traditional elements of literature, then science fiction is indeed fertile ground. Even critics who have a limited knowledge of or an innate hostility toward science fiction are usually willing to concede that the field is strong in the area of plot; in fact much of their criticism is that science fiction is plot-heavy. It is to be admitted that plot does play an important part in much science fiction and such emphasis can be seen in the works of such giants in the field as Wells, Heinlein, Pohl, and Asimov and in the work of many other writers as well. On the other hand many of the classics in the field embody strong characterization and unusual point-of-view. A reading of Roger Zelazny's "A Rose For Ecclesiastes," Daniel Keyes, "Flowers for Algernon," Alfred Bester's "Fondly Fahrenheit," or Ursula Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness, to mention only a few, serves to demonstrate the presence of these elements in science fiction. In the area of setting science fiction allows for a scope and variety as broad as the imagination of the

writer. It can range from the past to the present to the future; from planet Earth to the furthest reaches of the universe; from parallel worlds to alternate worlds; from the Big Bang to the Final Flicker. In the area of theme the range is just as vast: from contact with aliens to problems of ecology to the impact of the computer and other technical advances to exploring utopias and dystopias and speculating on the very meaning of existence.

The use of science fiction also allows the student to compare and contrast the ways in which different media treat the same stories and/or ideas. For example, in my humanities class, quite early in the quarter the students read H. G. Wells' The War Of The Worlds. They then listen to a tape of Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast based on H. G.'s story. Finally they watch the 1953 George Pal film version of the story. Much useful discussion is generated by comparing and contrasting these three works. One might talk about the way in which H. G. Wells uses vivid language to describe the Martians, their tripod machines, the "heat ray," and the masses fleeing from destruction as contrasted with Orson Welles' use of the spoken word and sound effects to tell the story of the invasion of earth. A comparison of these works might also yield an interdisciplinary approach as one makes the point that the artist is a product of his own age and the socio-economic pressures of it. H. G. Wells' rendering of the story might lead to a discussion of his view of the British imperialism of his day, while the radio show might lead to a discussion of the tensions in Europe in 1938, a factor that accounted in part for the effectiveness of the broadcast. A point that might be developed in relation to Pal's film version is that the character of Sylvia Van Buren, the female lead in the movie, was forced on him by the studio brass so that the film might have a "love interest." Her only function seems to be to assure the hero of his worth and to scream and run about at the worst possible moments. Such a treatment provides an interesting contrast

to Helen Benson the mature heroine of The Day The Earth Stood Still, a film from the same time period.

Other comparisons of a written work to the film it inspired are possible. The anthology They Came From Outer Space,edited by Jim Wynorski, contains twelve science fiction stories that saw later life as a film. They range from John W. Campbell, Jr.'s "Who Goes There?," a work that served as the basis for not one but two films, and Bradbury's "Fog Horn," the basis for The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms, through George Langelann's "The Fly," also the inspiration for two film versions, to Harlan Ellison's "A Boy and His Dog."

With the increased availability of video cassette recorders and video tapes at reasonable prices, the science fiction film can be used to illustrate the techniques and aesthetics of film making. For example, many valuable points about screen writing, editing, acting, shot selection, tempo, and production values can be made by contrasting Howard Hawks' well-crafted The Thing From Another World (1951) with Martin B. Cohen's Humanoids From The Deep (1980), one of the most derivative and carelessly made science fiction films of all time. While there may be limited interest in humanities courses at this time in film-making and television,with the multiplication of television channels and the increased use of VCR's, this is quite likely to change.

The value of science fiction in a humanities class can go beyond the study of the techniques and effects of literature and film, for science fiction also deals with ideas. Donald Wollheim may overstate the case in The Universe Makers when he says that "science fiction is not just a form of literature to be discussed as literature should be discussed--the lives of authors, the list of their works, the evaluation of their styles. Science fiction is above all a system of ideas. It deals with ideas more than it deals with literary styles." Certainly a study of science fiction can lead

to a discussion of ideas. Talking about aliens may lead to a discussion of attitudes toward people of different social classes, races, or nations. A story dealing with cryogenics or genetic engineering might lead to a discussion of the ethics and morality of population control, transplants, or euthanasia. Ecology on a fictional planet can lead to the discussion of the problems of ecology on this world.

Science fiction can also enable the student to gain a new way of viewing the world in which he lives and of adjusting to a changing world. In the first half of this century, Antonin Artaud, the French theatrical philosopher called for a new "optic" for seeing the world, a modern mythology for modern man. The limitations of the boundaries of the old mythology are recognized by Peter Shaffer in Equus when he has the character of Martin Dysart say of his inability to deal with a new and difficult patient, "That's the feeling. All reined up in old language and assumptions, straining to jump clean-hoofed on to a whole new track of being I only suspect is there. I can't see because my educated, average head is being held at the wrong angle."

If mythology is the way in which a culture or society explains the world then, perhaps, science fiction is the basis of this new mythology. Patricia Warrick argues that it is. In "Science Fiction Myths and Their Ambiguity" she points out that scientific concepts do change and that scientific truths are uncertain truths subject to change with new discoveries; therefore, science fiction is an appropriate mythology for a society in transition in a universe that is viewed not as a machine but as a network.

Adjusting to such a changing and uncertain world does present problems as Alvin Toffler has discussed at some length in Future Shock. Science fiction can help one adjust to these alternate possible futures in two significant ways. One aspect of science fiction could be called "escapist,"

a charge often leveled at it, and it is escapist in the best sense of the word, in the sense that other works of art allow the reader or viewer to transcend the often boring and trivial details of a mundane existence. The other way in which science fiction can help one adjust to a changing world is to allow one to live at least in the imagination in these possible alternate futures before experiencing them, or anything similar to them, in reality.

A final value of the study of science fiction is in the area of communication. C. P. Snow has observed that our society is really composed of two cultures: one the "arts-humanities" and the other the "science-technology." He further points out that these two cultures cannot understand each other, and, in fact, have little common ground for even attempts at communication. Enter science fiction. Lester Del Ray in The World of Science Fiction argues that one of the virtues of science fiction is that it can and does offer a way to bridge the gap between the humanities and the sciences. If for no other reason science fiction might be regarded as "a door in" if it enables bridges to be built in the minds of undergraduate students before their attitudes toward life become fixed and rigid. It would seem that courses in the humanities could aspire to no higher goal than that of encouraging flexibility of thought. The opening may not be as Mercutio says, "so wide as a church-door" but "'twill serve."

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